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WEATHER AND THE ARTIST

By JOHN F. RUNCIMAN¹

DR. JOHNSON rebuked Bozzy for complaining that bad weather depressed his spirits. Such frailty was unpardonable in a rational human being. Of course, a stormy evening might be detestable; for if the doctor ventured abroad the wind buffeted him and the rain drenched him, while if he remained solitary at home the "black dog" made him miserable. A pure summer morning met with his condescending approval; for he could go out to rejoice in the warmth and watch the busy world at work. Save for this one consideration of discomfort or comfort the weather did not and should not matter. Of two things, a wild wet night and fire and friends in the house and, on the other hand, a lovely morning and loneliness without, the doctor loved infinitely better the first—for to be alone was to him unendurable. When he reproved Boswell he spoke for his age as well as himself; he merely summarised curtly eighteenth-century indifference to external nature. Boswell mentions a baronet, a "Great Authority," who valued one whiff of theatre flambeaux far more highly than the scents of all our English hedgerows; and this gentleman—whose name, had Boswell revealed it, should even now compel our instant reverence—certainly would have agreed with Johnson. The proper study of mankind was man: that man was moulded and modified physically and mentally by his environment—by, amongst other influences, climate, the weather—was a conception that entered not the head of doctor or of baronet. Had Bozzy suggested it he would have been laughed out of the Club. He ventured no such thing. He, too, was of the eighteenth century.

No one looked at Nature save as a farmer looks at his growing crops or casts an anxious glance at threatening skies. Crabbe and Thomson made businesslike rhythmical inventories of phenomena; but the beauty, majesty, mystery, and terror of

¹This article is not really posthumous. Mr. John F. Runciman wrote it in 1915 and proofs were sent to him in 1916, but the lamented author was far too ill to read them though the final form of the article occupied his mind until the very last day before his death on April 7, 1916. I have hesitated a long time whether or no to comply with Mr. Runciman's request to "make the best of it" and "to correct any mistakes," but have finally decided to publish the article from the proofs as returned to me by Mrs. Runciman after her husband's death.—*Ed.*

Nature passed unseen, unfelt. The word terror reminds us of the passage in Congreve set by Johnson above any single passage Shakespeare wrote—the cathedral that struck terror on Congreve's aching sight, etc. Mr. George Warrington, lately arrived from the English colony of Virginia, heard the doctor's dictum and chuckled with malicious pleasure; but Mr. Warrington had enjoyed the privilege of knowing all that Wordsworth and Coleridge, Shelley and Keats, had said not only about Shakespeare but also the Nature Shakespeare knew. Congreve's verses are artificial, while Shakespeare's (choose where you will) seem to have grown spontaneously, to be as much the result of natural, elemental forces as an oak-tree or a rose. Congreve had forgotten Nature and Nature in return forgot him. There is none of her sap in his lines to keep them everlastingly fresh and green. The height and obscurity of the cathedral did *not* strike him with terror: he only said so because he thought it the proper thing to say. Having lost touch with Nature he could not understand more of man than his artificialities, his manners, his superficial foibles and imbecilities. Today every thinking person understands man better than man was understood by Congreve or any of those who held that the proper study of etc., etc., mainly because we know how intimately man and outer nature are allied, how tightly interwoven are our destinies with nature. We need not flatter ourselves that we are of finer and more sensitive mental stuff than our forebears. We are only in this particular respect a little better educated. The inspired men have taught us where to look and how to look; we see what we have been taught to see; we see little else than the things the inspired men first saw for us. We see all Nature a living, organic whole, with man playing his part, performing his function therein.

Some few human beings are blest with the gift of understanding Nature for themselves; a very few see with their own eyes and hear with their own ears, feel Nature's moods and catch her "incommunicable thrill" by the direct touch. To many a lady a sunset, Turnerian in splendour, is as a wallpaper or bed-hanging; the voice of the sea or the wooded hill is a noise that prevents her chattering. Why, she hardly knows how to smell, and the rich odour of the rose reminds her only of a scent-bottle from the chemist's shop. To many a prosperous city-gentleman such things are nothing at all. Call his attention to them and he will look up impatiently from the newspaper in which he has just skipped a quotation from this article. We should all be in the same evil case but for the great poets, painters

and musicians, and perhaps two or three of the novelists. Wordsworth heard the vale resounding and wrote a few immortal lines; and now we hear the tempest with his ears—cannot, in truth, do other, for the poets are masterful fellows. The musical amongst us come, probably, more under the domination of Wagner than of any other artist so far as Nature is concerned; he compels us to view her through the mirage raised by his magic in all the operas from *The Flying Dutchman* to *The Dusk of the Gods*. So wonderful is the illusion that we seem to sniff the very scent of wet leaves and to feel the wind toss our hair about. But to Wagner I will return in a moment. Let me remind readers, as an instance of the compelling force of the master-artist's vision, that they cannot pass through London's streets, or gaze at the lower reaches of the river, or hear the roar of the sea, or feel the keenness of an evening March wind, without being reminded of Dickens. The storms that shook the Maypole Inn or roared through the old London streets (*Barnaby Rudge*), the Yarmouth storm, or the souging of the wind as it creeps over the low flats (*David Copperfield*)—these and a hundred other visions have for ever coloured our imaginations. We may not consciously think of Dickens; but this is certain: to no one in the world can Nature be what she would have been to us had not Dickens lived and written. A drab London street is something more than a drab London street: in some degree it often becomes to us that drab street as Dickens saw it while he laboured under the stress of an emotion stirred by some imagined deed or thought or suffering of his characters.

If we mentally set the art-products of the eighteenth century alongside those of the nineteenth, and consider them roughly in the lump, a sharp contrast at once makes itself felt. To-day external nature, and largely the weather, form an important part of the artist's raw material. In words, or paint, or tones, he paints it for the sheer joy of painting it, because the creative impulse drives him to try, vainly or successfully, to express, to communicate to others, that "incommunicable thrill" of things; or he utilizes it (profane phrase!) to enable him with clearness and force to unfold meanings existing in his mind before he turned his gaze towards the trees and waters and skies, to express moods which did not originate at the moment of envisaging external things. Instances abound of the artist at work for mere love of depicting beautiful phenomena, or translating nature's moods into terms of human moods. Mendelssohn's unspeakably lovely *Hebrides* overture is picturesque work without any *arrière pensée*;

so is Hamish MacCunn's *Land o' the Mountain and the Flood*. The first is the voice of the sea as it rolls amongst the Western Isles; the other transports us, helplessly, willingly, joyfully, to the lochs of mountains of the Scottish highlands. In Shelley's *Ode to the West Wind*, thoughts, culminating in "if Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?", grow out of the mood created by the storm. I have not sufficient knowledge of painting to guess whether the Dutch artists tried to interpret Nature's moods. When I look at one of their paintings, I read it as such an interpretation; yet perhaps they mainly thought of beautiful arrangements of line and colour. Of the artist deliberately using natural phenomena as a help to expression all art later than 1800 affords numberless examples. Wagner never attempted such a thing as the *Hebrides* overture: the picturesque for its own sake stirred him deeply; but the creative brain only began to seethe and throw musical images when with the picturesque was associated the dramatic motive. Then we get glories and splendours indeed—the wondrous beauty of the river in *Lohengrin*, gliding calmly under sunny skies from the far-away land of perpetual dawn to the distant sea. The Swan floating on it, at once its symbol and its meaning; the storms in the *Ring*, each adding to the dramatic force and intensity of a scene. Dickens worked in the same way. You read a descriptive passage, a passage which is pure description to a certain point, and suddenly you find it is done with a double purpose, that your mood is tuned ready for what is going to happen. Take the great Yarmouth storm in *David Copperfield*: when the climax is reached and David is shown the body of Steerforth, drowned, "with his head resting on his arm, as he used to lie at school," do you not realize in a flash the hand of the consummate master? that the hubbub and uproar of the elements do not altogether account for, but mainly reflect, the agitation and nervous premonitions of Copperfield's mind, and that you, the reader, have been so worked upon that the final blow, when it falls, falls with stupendous effect. A not quite parallel instance is the Waterloo chapter in *Vanity Fair*: "all day long the noise of battle rolled," the excitement reaches its highest point: then

No more firing was heard at Brussels—the pursuit rolled miles away. The darkness came down on the field and city, and Amelia was praying for George, who was lying on his face, dead, with a bullet through his heart.

The tension is suddenly loosened ere the new stroke falls: it is an anticlimax and perhaps the first climax in all literature.

This, though roughly parallel to the Dickens effect, is not a specimen of the employment of Nature, save that the touch "the darkness came down on the field and city" adds to pathos of Osborne, lying alone on the field after all the storm and uproar of the day.

In so far it is an instance of the manner in which the modern artist employs Nature as a means of expression. If we go back to the eighteenth-century men we find nothing of this. Stevenson, speaking of Fielding, I think, refers to a pair of lovers in a novel retiring to the privacy of a "practicable wood": we are told nothing about the wood, it possesses neither character, scent nor colour; it serves no purpose beyond that of sheltering hero and heroine. As for poetry, the Pastoral was the most inane and artificial thing in content and form ever devised. Delight in nature's loveliness found no utterance in words; you find genuine emotion only when men contemplate men—or women. There were exceptions, for periods overlap, and the world did not suddenly awake to exterior beauty as the clock struck 12 midnight on 31 December, 1799, ushering in 1800. It is significant that while Johnson scoffed at Gray, it is precisely Gray that Carlyle selects as the first man of the time to betray awe, wonder, delight in natural scenery *for its own sake*. Previously, in effect Carlyle says, men had regarded mountain and plain, wood and river, as the cup that holds the wine, but Gray began to rave about the beauty of the chalice. Yet Gray was so much of his age that even when deeply moved his utterance was stilted, without colour, unvocal and did not render the atmosphere he felt, and he seemed half ashamed of his enthusiasm. For the true thing the world had to await Coleridge, Wordsworth, Keats and Shelley. In music there had been two superb painters of the picturesque: Purcell, who died in 1695, and Handel, who lived till 1759. After them the pictorial elements can be found no more in any music written earlier than about 1810. Beethoven loved Nature and tried to "express his feelings" about her. His phrase was correct: he never tried to express his feelings about her by depicting her. Weber in his operas, and Schubert in some of his songs (notably the Erl-king, a most gorgeous tone-picture), opened out the new path. They cast away the melodic formulas of the Viennese school. Schubert belonged to that school by training, and in his instrumental compositions there is not a picturesque page: only in his songs did his natural genius show itself fully. After Weber we know the rest of the story. Nearly every composer has imitated Wagner's nature drawing; not one has used Nature with Wagner's artistic purpose. Wagners are not born every day of the week. But this

much is certain: musicians can no more ignore our environment of woods, waters, fields and trees, and all natural phenomena, than poets and painters can.

And now let us note what at first seems rather curious. While weather forms a large proportion of the artist's raw material, it is with bad weather he gains his noblest results. On the whole, that is; for in words, colours and tones men have often hymned the glory of halcyon days. But were it worth while or justifiable to draw up a sort of scale of values, at the lower end would be a harmless drawing of still-life—a peach, an amputated geranium, a cabbage and an inert tomato—and at the upper end a vision of the elements raging in all their might, power, terrible beauty and mystery—ragged clouds, storm-tossed trees and storm-torn waters, thunders and lightnings. Ransack the cupboards of your memory and what comes out first? Turner's glorious Venice dreams? No: rather some of the storm pictures or the tragic *Téméraire*. Shakespeare's Moonlight sleeping on the bank or the little speeches in *Henry IV*?—a volume in six lines—

King

How bloodily the sun begins to peer
Above yon bosky hill? The day looks pale
At his distemperature.

Prince

The southern wind
Doth play the trumpet to his purposes
And by his hollow whistling in the leaves
Foretells a tempest and a blustering day.

Or again the “rude, imperious surge”? Wordsworth's cattle, “forty . . . feeding as one,” or “the mighty waters rolling evermore”? Wagner's Swan floating on the broad silver stream and the Woodland Voices or the opening of *The Valkyrie* and the introduction to the third act of *Siegfried*? Shelley's “My soul is an enchanted boat,” or “O wild west Wind, thou breath of Autumn's being”? We need hardly put the questions to ourselves: they carry their own immediate answer—unless indeed my mental constitution is very different from that of other men—which I don't believe to be the case.

It is significant that Milton liked best to compose in the fall of the year, and that Burns invented songs as he walked under roaring trees on wintry winter nights. That the sublime should inspire the poet to create the sublime is after all only what we should expect. But let the reader again consult his

memory and he may be a little startled. I have dear recollections of sweet Spring mornings in a French village known to many Americans—the blue sky and fleecy clouds, the dusty cloud of grey-green buds on the quickening branches of the trees, the shining river with the merry gabbling of the women as they washed their linen on the banks, the pleasant laughter of the peasants as they laboured on their little holdings. But what comes to mind most vividly and affords me keenest delight is the recollection of uproarous evenings when in the sheltered hotel courtyard one could hear the tempest clatter along the deserted street, and the deep diapason of the forest boomed like a mighty organ. The ancient battered church stood high on a hill, and greatly daring we would venture for a walk round it, while the wind shouted angrily round the tower, or sang high and clear, through the broken belfry lattice, a Requiem to the dead who lay below, the dead whose bones, washed out of their shallow graves by the rains of hundreds of years, lay unprotected on the ferruginous soil, the very image of desolation. On the canal one might see the barges, the cabin doors to leeward opened wide, showing the stove-fires burning bright and the wives cooking supper while the children tumbled about; in the auberge the men took their evening glass, comfortable under cover, while outside all was hurly-burly.

It was pleasant after such an expedition to return to the noble wood-fire and enjoy a pipe by the booming chimney. And sometimes I reflected: Do our brain-cells retain memories of the days of our pirate forebears, the fierce delight of facing the storm, the thrill of danger? Or—humiliating thought—is it merely that, once safely indoors, the comfort, warmth, brightness, are made thousand times more grateful by the turmoil and stress, the clatter, the rain and the wind without? Milton may have loved the storms of winter: he loved also to dictate his verses when he was warm in bed.